

## queen of the bloody mire

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## queen of the bloody mire

by [Kieron\\_ODuibhir](#)

### Summary

She hadn't learned to relax around the man, around Palpatine's durasteel fist of a dragon, the one-man army who'd plucked her out of the Senate and put her on the throne, but she had stopped being so terribly aware of his every move. He had become a menacing piece of furniture, at some point in the many hours he inexplicably chose to spend standing and watching a wall in her office while she worked.

The hissing presence of him had retreated into the background, like the sounds of a working ship in flight.

### Notes

A Coruscanti standard week is five workdays. (They don't have the concept of weekends because the Republic is lowkey a capitalist dystopia even before the Empire layers fascism on top.) So when Leia says the Emperor has been dead for 'two weeks' that's ten days.

It should have been all the clue Leia needed. The way the man from Intelligence had kept darting anxious glances at Vader, as he delivered his report on the conspiracy within Command to unseat

her from the Imperial Throne, as though he expected the looming cyborg to erupt into a rage and summarily destroy him for so much as *mentioning* attempted treason.

But Leia was used to people being terrified of Vader and eager to be out of Vader's presence—she agreed with these people entirely, although she had already gotten very good at not showing it in the six days since her precipitous elevation—and she was tired. The Imperial Palace was an enemy of restful sleep, even if she hadn't had a thousand different pressures beating down on her and demanding attention and forcing her mind to grind onward in alertness, every time the silent black behind her eyelids made a space.

And even without both those things, she would probably *still* have been pulling twenty-hour workdays just trying to catch up with Palpatine's formwork.

Not just the stuff that had piled up between his death and her investiture, nor all the work she'd brought on herself by launching the various ongoing project reviews and departmental audits she'd decided were necessary, due to the inaccessibility of her predecessor's private records.

(She had an uncomfortable certainty that by the time the slicers she'd put on *that* got anywhere she'd have independently reconstructed everything she actually *needed* to know to do her new job, and would just be tipping up a rubbish bin of dirty imperial secrets over her own head, but unfortunately she needed that information, too.)

No, any time she made a significant dent in the reasonable and necessary work, if *any* of it could be called so in this blight of a government, she was faced with a tangled backlog of the fact that Palpatine seemed to have had a very cursory relationship with actually *doing* any of his formwork.

Why was that. Did he not *enjoy* his ill-gotten empire?

He couldn't have been like this all along, he'd never have functioned as a Senator and Chancellor—even in the vestigial Imperial Senate where she'd so recently worked, the only people *this* slapdash were the ones being wholly carried by aides and advisors. And if Palpatine had merely been the figurehead of someone *else's* conspiracy, the galaxy today would be a very different place.

In principle, the Imperial government required the Imperial Person's constant involvement and oversight to get anything accomplished. In practice, Palpatine seemed to have parceled out this work to his various toadies and let them muddle through alone most of the time, except when the mood took him to swoop in on them at the moment he was least expected.

This ought to have been good news for Leia's aims, since it meant Galactic government did not actually rest entirely on the pivot-point of the throne, which *should* make it much simpler to juggle things until that throne could be obsoleted. But unfortunately in practice it just meant that the governance of the whole galaxy was functionally vested in the autocratic regimes of Palpatine's various high-level personnel appointments.

Which meant that Leia had to *rely* on this assortment of awful people long enough to successfully oust them from their massive, sprawling personal fiefdoms.

Which *meant* that her work of euthanizing the Empire under the nose of its most passionate devotee was harder than it would have been if Palpatine had bothered to be a *competent* despot. Which she was absolutely holding against him along with the long list of his crimes.

At least he'd not been idiot enough to foist off the military the same way. He'd kept his Moffs and Admirals jockeying for power, and if the military as a whole was anyone's personal fief it was

Vader's. And if she had learned only one thing in the two Core-Standard weeks since Palpatine's ignominious death of apparent heart failure and falling-headfirst-from-his-pod-to-the-distant-floor-of-the-Senate-chamber, it was that Lord Vader had not *remotely* been equipped to plot insurrection against his Emperor.

Everyone under the impression that he had murdered the old man and installed Leia as some kind of puppet was giving him too much credit. That much, in the tumult and confusion of being shoved into this job, had been a relief to figure out.

Vader's insistence on being present for all reports from Imperial Intelligence suggested *he* thought Ysanne Isard might have been behind her predecessor's decease. The Intelligence chief had been something of a favorite of Palpatine's, so the word went, and Leia had always had access to the highest quality of rumor. The Emperor had *doted* on the woman, as much as he ever did. As though positioning himself as a replacement for the father she'd arranged to have him kill.

There had been gifts of spaceships and at least one parcel of land on a planet Isard had never bothered to visit, and dinner engagements, and the occasional opera. Certainly, Isard had had more opportunity than most to arrange a seemingly natural death. Considering she controlled the bulk of his counter-assassin forces, almost certainly the best overall chance of doing it without being caught, if you discounted Vader, which as it turned out you should.

And of course Mas Amedda, whom Leia thought an unlikely culprit for reasons of character and whom Vader had already thoroughly neutralized. Dead men were no threat.

Leia agreed with Vader's assessment of the danger coming from Intel, and should probably be relieved old Iceheart was working with her at all considering the circumstances of her elevation, but in fact she would prefer the woman hurry up and betray her, so she could be crushed and replaced. Optimistic as that was.

The unfortunate agent explaining in a steadily less composed way about the solidifying conspiracy within Naval Command to overthrow Leia for a list of reasons ranging from her rumored Rebel sympathies, through her age, to her lack of personal ties to Palpatine, probably knew all of this perfectly well, come to think of it. He probably half expected to be accused of making things up to sow dissent. It was the kind of thing Isard would *do*.

It was lucky Leia still had some limited access to her family's intelligence channels (Papa would give her more if she asked, but she refused to risk them that way) or she'd have no information she could trust at all.

"So...they're having their final strategy meeting in the officer's club at 510 Empirica tonight, to select their new emperor candidate," the Imperial agent concluded.

Leia thought there was a good chance the entire conspiracy would fall apart there, every Moff and Admiral vying moronically for the hot seat in a gloriously explosive spectacle of why Imperial ideology was so ultimately self-defeating, but she couldn't afford to turn a blind eye just because of that. They *might* actually rally around a leader, and anyway the pieces of the plot would only reassemble later, if they fell apart now. Maybe under someone competent enough to manage better operational security, so she'd get less warning.

Leia leaned forward in the comfortable chair with a discreet footrest that she'd brought in three days ago, to replace Palpatine's horrible throne thing. She'd have assumed that chair was still more evidence he never spent much time in his office, doing actual admin work, except all his thrones seemed to have been like that. Why was *that*? There was plenty of evidence of tacky luxury around the Palace, one way and another.

She supposed the same bizarre asceticism that had kept him in plain black robes for the better part of two decades must lie behind the ostentatious, wholly cushionless thrones, but that didn't mean she understood it. Old bloodsucker had been far too boney to be sitting on hard chairs. His rear end should have tolerated this *even less well* than Leia's.

She rested the point of her chin on the second knuckles of her first two fingers, pursing her mouth in her most coolly penetrating expression. Being Empress called for twice the theater of being Senator or Princess, but some of the techniques were the same.

"And does the IIA have any recommendations?"

"Ah, er. No, your Majesty. Would you like our analysts to send you one?"

"No, that's fine." A test, then. Very well. That was almost fair. She did have a lot of lives in her hands.

Leia contemplated a second longer, staring past the sweating agent, who'd decided he would do best to fix his eyes permanently on the imperial seal blazoned on the wall behind Leia. Too bad for him he was Imperial Intelligence, and sympathy for him was one of the things she would not allow herself. Even in this office, she had her pride as a member of the Alliance to Restore the Republic.

"Lord Vader," she said, without turning to look at the hulking dark figure at her shoulder.

"Your Majesty."

"This is a military matter. You are the Supreme Commander, are you not?" Of course he was. In *practice* Palpatine used to second him to the command of various Moffs and occasionally lesser officers on a regular basis (whenever he was particularly annoyed with him the rumor went, although they had never been seen to publically quarrel), but in formal terms Vader was the highest-ranking military officer in the Empire. "You see to it. Attend this meeting, determine the facts of the matter, and sort your officers out."

She should have known better. She *did* know better. She was sitting there, less than a day ago, in an office with a man on the verge of apoplexy from terror at sharing space with the giant deadly cyborg, and she knew his reputation, and she was still herself living with the daily terror that he would decide he'd made some kind of error and remove her from the Imperial seat in the most expedient fashion.

But she had begun to be used to him. Most sophonts could adapt to anything, given enough exposure, and begin to see it as ordinary, and Humans were better at it than most. She *knew* that.

She had all the necessary pieces, and yet she was taken by surprise the following dawn, when her morning security briefing opened with *holonews excerpts* of Vader's distinctive brand of carnage all across the interior of what looked like an ostentatiously lavish but oddly colorless version of a spacer cantina, and therefore must be an Imperial officer's club—a space that, while not public, couldn't be considered *private*, either. Of *course* someone with a holocamera had managed to get access, and sold the footage on.

The only reason the scene was legal to display in respectable news feeds under Imperial decency laws was that there was no blood or gore. A lightsaber left clean wounds, especially upon the dead.

*Sort your officers out*, she'd said, but the jumble of limbs in cool grey uniform fabric was such that sorting them out was going to be a job for a whole team of coroners.

Was she supposed to ship them back to their families like this? How had Palpatine handled Vader's

public relations failures? She hadn't realized he *had* any. Maybe he hadn't. It still seemed likely to her that most of his atrocities had played into Palpatine's schemes, especially considering how Vader still liked to thunder about the supremacy of the horrible man's will.

But was *this* a failure, or something he'd done to her deliberately?

Everyone knew about it. She'd be ruined if she admitted openly she hadn't *chosen* to take this hardline approach. All the credibility she'd built up would vanish, she'd become a helpless child in the middle of a vast death machine she could not control, and there would be ten times as many conspiracies to unseat her by tomorrow. As far as the Galaxy was concerned, this was going to have to be her doing.

It *was* her doing. It just hadn't been what she meant.

She was still staring at the charred abattoir that had been made of the officers' club, not even paging on to Isard's analysts' summary of the event and its fallout, when Vader let himself into her office.

This was a terrible habit of his, which she had nearly stopped noticing—the hiss of his breath announced him long before he came through the door, and she'd been using this office for nearly a week before it had sunk in that she was, apparently, *actually Empress*, and not Vader's prisoner in some bizarre political pantomime, and subsequently occurred to her that she *could* demand he knock before barging into her workspace.

Everyone else made appointments with her secretaries, her secretaries who were competent and knew Palpatine's terrible filing system and cringed whenever she snapped at them, and looked like they were going to cry when she made Vader talk to them. Who had come with the office, and whom she'd have to replace eventually, because they were Palpatine's.

And because while she probably still wasn't getting out of this job alive, it was starting to look like she was going to get a chance to actually *do* the job, first. Maybe eventually she'd be secure enough to bring some of her own people in, to help her sort out and survive this snakepit, rather than keeping everyone she valued as far away as possible so they wouldn't go down with her. But even if she got everything else under control, the job would still require dealing with Vader.

She thought that, staring at the carnage she hadn't learned about nearly fast enough, hearing Vader's breath grow louder in her ears as he ignored the secretaries and drew near the office door, and hated it and him and herself.

In recent days, she'd almost stopped hearing the sound, he had been around so often and for so long, without doing anything of real interest. She'd kept him visible at her side to intimidate political malcontents, because he was the durasteel fist of the Empire and the sole firm pillar of her rule, the only reason she was *in* this kriffing room behind this kriffing desk, now without completely awful kriffing chair.

Vader, and the fact that most people had always obeyed the Empire simply because it was the path of least resistance, and most people just wanted to be left alone.

She hadn't learned to relax around the man, around Palpatine's durasteel fist of a dragon, the one-man army who'd plucked her out of the Senate and put her on the throne, but she had stopped being so terribly *aware* of his every move. He had become a menacing piece of furniture, at some point in the many hours he inexplicably chose to spend standing and watching a wall in her office while she worked.

The hissing presence of him had retreated into the background, like the sounds of a working ship in flight.

Sometimes as time went by she had found herself breathing to the rhythm of it, as she paged carefully through file after file of high-level intelligence a hundred skilled Alliance operatives could have died heroically without equaling, and made time in between to issue routine approvals and missives to the Senate, and executive directions to put out various fires across the Galaxy—it soothed her a little to put the Imperial Navy to work delivering food relief to planets stricken by drought and flood, or fighting those pirates that she knew for a fact weren't Alliance collaborators. Vader's respirator was not a sound that would in itself be alarming, were it not attached to him, and she had forgotten, just a little, to be afraid of him.

Now she looked up at that gleaming black carapace as the sound entered the room, high breathy note in, low one out, and saw the weapon of a man every rebel for all her life had known to fear.

Steepling her hands, fingertips pressing together firmly but not so hard they went white with pressure and betrayed her, she greeted him in her customary cool tones: "Lord Vader. I have just been admiring your handiwork."

He paused, just inside the door. She had been in close quarters with him enough for long enough, now, to know what it looked like when he was taken aback.

"Your Majesty," he said slowly. "Was it not to your satisfaction?"

So he had observed the holo she had open, and picked up on her poor temper. Good. You never knew, with Vader, what subtext he would catch and what would pass him by entirely.

Once she'd gotten past thinking of Vader as a terrifying mastermind, it had been easy to look at his singlemindedness and apparent lack of personal motivation and think of him as an idiot—as, in fact, particularly threatening mobile furniture. She *knew* better, she'd read his threat assessments. She'd seen him *make* threat assessments. But it had still been easy, because she'd needed it to be easy when everything else was hard.

Carefully, she breathed in, and out. Long, grounding breaths, matched to the careful pressure of her fingertips, and not to his ventilator. She had healthy lungs, she could breathe in much longer than that.

"You might say so," she allowed. "I would very much value some insight into your reasoning for slaughtering—" with a flick of her right hand she called up the analysis before pressing her fingers back together, "—what seems to have been three Moff's, eight Admirals, and over two dozen each of captains and commanders of my Imperial Navy."

Again he regarded her for a long breathing cycle with that unreadable, rigid mask.

"They were conspiring against your rule and imperial person," he at last intoned. "Having confirmed this, I performed my duty and saw to the problem."

Leia did another breathing exercise. "As I had directed," she acknowledged. "I see. Well, Lord Vader, for ease and clarity of future communication: do not presume my orders extend to massacre if they do not include such a directive. In future, please do not kill people without my *express* instruction."

This was pushing the breadth of her command over him, but not in ways that didn't need tested. That hadn't needed tested days ago.

This command was also making things more difficult for *her* because, if he complied, she would be forced to actually *give* that approval sometimes, making her directly responsible for his actions. For his murders. She wasn't naïve enough to think she could avoid having him kill at all—even if he *was* a loyal enough hound that his bloodthirst wouldn't make him shake off the leash if she drew it so short, she had an Empire to run. She'd accepted in the first days that she wouldn't be able to keep her hands clean. That trying to do *nothing* with all this power would be a dereliction of duty in the same way as not picking up a blaster and firing back, when your family was cornered by storm troopers or pirates.

And the alternative to laying down this restriction was having Darth Vader *always* potentially about to kill someone because he thought she wanted him to.

And, worse—if she learned, as she thought she could, to choose her words so he would aim himself almost exclusively at people she really wanted gone, then it would be very, very easy to slip into the habit of relying on his lightsaber to solve problems like this for her, and pretend that it wasn't her fault because she never *told* him to. Very easy, and unacceptable.

But none of that would matter if it turned out he wouldn't listen to *no*.

He was still staring at her. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he said, dubiousness rolling off him almost as thick as off an old soldier facing a new-minted lieutenant giving ill-considered orders, which she had seen only once but remembered forever because of the mingled scorn and (as herself a very young person who routinely issued commands) a powerful empathetic mortification she had felt at the scene.

“I mean,” she clarified, “that if I direct you to perform a task, your methods should only be violent if I say so, and they should only be *lethal* if I say so. Understood?”

“Thank you, my Master,” Vader intoned, apparently for the explication. She wondered what he'd thought she meant. Had she just avoided a constant stream of comm-calls from Vader as he asked for permission to kill each individual enemy in a firefight he'd intentionally started? It was very difficult to tell exactly when Vader stopped being sarcastic.

But she'd gotten through this alive, at least. In her new life, that alone was an ongoing victory.

“Has Intelligence isolated any surviving co-conspirators?” Vader asked, which was unfortunately a sensible question because even with as much of the Navy as she had recalled for the audits it was *unlikely* to be only officers assigned to Coruscant that had been plotting to overthrow her, although she suspected the loss of so many Moffs and Admirals would have set the rest of them back quite a bit.

“Some,” she replied, paging through the report absently, as though she'd already looked at it and called up the images at the beginning again to make a statement to Vader, instead of wasting nearly twenty minutes mesmerized by the corpses. “And when we do bring them in they *will* be facing court-martial properly. Summary execution is a sloppy method of keeping order.”

She hated being dependent on Isard to conduct this investigation. Palpatine *had* had personal agents, but predictably none of them had made contact with her in any way she recognized. Using them would have made her feel nearly as vile, anyway, as the thought of sleeping in the dead man's bed, as the Palace attendants had seemed to genuinely expect when she first arrived.

If they'd offered their services for her to use, she would have done it. Vile or no. Relying on Alliance resources for this was unworkable for several reasons, so she *had* to put herself and her decisions in the hands of the person who had now been elevated above Vader and the newly dead

Moff Buskord on the list of those most likely to arrange her death.

Tarkin, the only surviving Moff for reasons of having been in orbit above Corellia during the massacre, was now above Vader on the list but below Isard, if only for reasons of access.

If Leia could get Isard to prove his involvement in the plot she would have him formally executed without qualm. She *would*. She'd have happily shot him to death personally for the Rebel Alliance at any point in the last three years, if it had been at all a reasonable exchange of resources, as highly placed an agent as herself in exchange for one single abusive officer in an abusive system. Executing him might not feel as good as assassinating, but it was still a net benefit to the galaxy.

“Put your personal resources behind checking her work,” she said, sending Vader a copy of the Intel report. She was sure Vader had personal agents of his own, as she currently couldn't afford to, and she was at least very sure that Vader and Isard wouldn't *conspire* to get rid of her unless she got much more obviously Rebel in her policies than she had so far. “And get me a list within the next three days of your personal recommendations for who to promote to fill those empty Admiral seats.”

Moff was a stupid title, and she wasn't replacing them.

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